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Uprooting: How Can I Ethically Sell My Home in a Gentrifying Neighborhood?

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Abstract

In areas that are rapidly gentrifying, the decisions sellers make—to whom to sell, and for how much to sell—are of particular consequence to their neighborhood. As someone who studies the myriad harms of gentrification, these decisions were particularly acute when I was facing them myself. Interweaving Nashville history, gentrification scholarship, and personal reflection, this article traces the ways my family navigated the question of how ethically to sell our home in a gentrifying market in order to be accountable to the neighborhoods we left behind.

Keywords: gentrification, Nashville, relational-accountability

Dr. Thurber is an Assistant Professor in the Portland State University School of Social Work. Her scholarship is broadly concerned with the ways persistent inequities are spatialized, and the possibilities for building more just communities through innovations in policy, practice and participatory inquiry. Recent projects include consulting with the City of Nashville on an equitable development plan for the city, studying the effects of mixed-income housing on social well-being, and conducting action research designed to amplify resident-led efforts to improve their neighborhoods.

There was some irony in moving my White family from our home in Montana into a historically Black and working-class neighborhood in Nashville, Tennessee, so that I could study gentrification. Gentrification is most commonly understood as the process through which areas once home to high levels of affordable housing transform, catering to middle- and upper-income residents (Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2008). As the newest residents of our block, my family reflected this demographic shift, and we grappled continuously with how to be good neighbors in the context of neighborhood change. I pushed through my anxiety related to being a "gentrifier" (when the Black family next to us put up a "for sale" sign in their yard days after we moved in, I had a sinking—and ridiculously self-absorbed—suspicion that it was because of us) to build friendships with my Black neighbors. I also reached out to my White neighbors and noticed the contrasting ease with which I made those acquaintances. Through stories of long-time residents, I learned how, after school desegregation was finally enforced in the 1970s, White families pulled their children from public schools; how deindustrialization particularly hurt Black workers; and how, not long ago, taxis would not drive down our now-quiet street out of fear of crime and violence. At times I spoke out against decisions made by my nearly all-White neighborhood association that adversely affected the predominantly Black children in our neighborhood schools, and I also chose not to send my daughters to those same schools. I was in this mix, wrestling with how best to address the complicated legacy of systemic racism, neighborhood disinvestment, underfunded schools, intergroup tensions, and now gentrification. But it wasn't until I neared completion of my doctoral degree and we prepared to sell our home that I realized just how implicated I had become in the

phenomenon I had been studying. The decisions we were about to make—to whom to sell, and for how much to sell—would directly impact our neighbors and neighborhood. Interweaving Nashville history, gentrification scholarship, and personal reflection, this article traces the ways my family navigated the question of how ethically to sell our home in a gentrifying market in order to be accountable to the neighborhoods we left behind.

Situating gentrification

There is often confusion about whether gentrification is a good or a bad thing. Clearly there are many residents who want to see improvements in their neighborhoods, such as safe, quality housing, an area grocery store, or improved parks for families to enjoy. The difference between general revitalization and gentrification hinges on the intended beneficiaries of such improvements. Will the people who live here now be able to afford those houses, shop in those stores, and enjoy those parks? In my East Nashville neighborhood, the answer is clearly no. In recent years, the neighborhood has steadily become wealthier and whiter.

Indeed, throughout much of the country, race and place are so entangled that gentrification cannot be fully understood without attention to the legacy of racist housing and urban development policies. In 1860, just 4,000 Black people lived in the city of Nashville. This dramatically changed with the onset of the Civil War (Lovett, 1999). Within the first year of battle, the Union army gained control of the city, and a great migration of freedom-seeking Black families found their way to Nashville. By 1865, the Black population had tripled (Lovett, 1999). As these new residents were

still considered someone else's property, the Union army settled them into what were called "contraband camps," three large encampments spread around the city (Lovett, 1999). In exchange for lodging, the army enlisted the labor of Black men and women fleeing slavery to build the forts, trenches, and rifle pits necessary to fortify the city (Kreyling, 2005).

The conditions were squalid, subject to flooding and disease (Lovett, 1999). And yet, these camps held the promise of freedom for those born into slavery, and after the war these became the first Black neighborhoods in Nashville. Just six months after the war ended, Fisk University was founded on the edge of one camp, and continues to operate as the state's oldest private historically black colleges and universities. Near another, a Black Baptist congregation formed within a year of the war's close, and in 2017 they celebrated their 150th anniversary. Nashville's Black neighborhoods have been remarkably stable, and yet have long been sites of tension, marked by deprivation and disinvestment from the city while also being sites of industriousness, congregation, creativity, and resilience.

The racialization of Nashville neighborhoods continued after the containment of Blacks in contraband camps during the war: Redlining practices limited investments in Black neighborhoods in the 1930s, while decades of discriminatory loan practices provided subsidized home ownership opportunities for White families in the suburbs. Urban renewal freeway construction gutted and/or annexed Black neighborhoods from the 1950s through the 1970s. Although the Civil Rights Movement won important victories against discrimination, the racialization of Nashville intensified during the period. As historian

Benjamin Houston writes, "The dotted lines of roads now replaced the WHITE and COLORED signs of the past ... an entire city was redrawn and reshaped in order to preserve the legacies of the past" (2012, p. 242).

Although each city's history is distinct, the racialization of Nashville neighborhoods also followed a familiar pattern of racial and economic segregation. The places where poor and working-class residents live—particularly those proximal to city centers—result from planned and chronic state disinvestment (Harvey, 2005), and are often marked by the absence of valuable resources (such as quality schools, transit access, and health care), as well as the presence of increased risks (such as the siting of hazardous waste facilities) (Lipsitz, 2007; Pulido, 2000). The places where wealthy people live have also been created, but by planned and pervasive investments in infrastructure, resources, and amenities. Historically, wealthy areas were racially segregated by design, the result of racist lending practices and neighborhood covenants that kept People of Color out. Today, continued institutional discrimination, such as the disproportionate targeting of Black and Latino families with subprime loans (Bocian, Ernst, & Li, 2008), and racial biases, including the preference of most White residents to live in White neighborhoods (Krysan, 2002), reproduces geographies deeply segregated by race and class. As a result, People of Color—at all income levels—are more likely than their White counterparts to live in disinvested areas (Lipsitz, 2011).

Critically, state disinvestment in an area should never be equated with the level of investment residents have in the place they live. In spite of the destructive forces of racial and economic segregation, across the

country, communities of Color have built—and rebuilt—robust neighborhoods, often supporting and supported by vibrant business and cultural districts. Many of these neighborhoods have experienced massive disruptions, most notably by urban renewal projects of the 1950s, which demolished over 1,600 Black neighborhoods, and cleared the way for freeways and other infrastructure projects (Fullilove, 2004). Gentrification marks yet another massive disruption.

In our current economic system, the finite spaces in the city must be made and remade in order to provide new opportunities for wealth production (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). That means that when cities experience economic growth, individuals, governments, and private developers look to new markets—which in recent decades have been the previously neglected neighborhoods in the urban core. Housing values in previously affordable neighborhoods rise, and businesses begin to cater towards middle- and upper-income residents. Importantly, gentrification does not "just happen"; it is the result of historic disinvestment and current reinvestment that together created the conditions in which the estimated value of my Nashville home increased by 122% in just under five years.

Transforming Nashville

In Nashville's current development boom, many of the city's historically Black neighborhoods are now radically transforming. According to census data, between 2000 and 2010, the city's population of Black residents increased by 15%, but in my neighborhood the trend is reversed; there is a 20% decrease in Black families. Between 2002 and 2016, housing values in our area rose 106%, double the countywide average.¹ Over five years, my

neighbors and I watched as in all directions the modest workforce housing of the 1960s was demolished and replaced by much larger homes few of us could afford.

The material consequences of gentrification have been well documented. As housing values rise, so do residents' rents or property taxes (Brookings Institution, 2001; Zuk et al., 2015). Certainly, rising housing values benefit some homeowners. Some may elect to sell their homes and cash in on the improving market. Others may weather the rising property taxes for a more significant return on investment down the road. But for those living on low or fixed incomes—including many of my neighbors working in the hospitality industry, my elderly neighbors, and those unable to work—the rising housing costs are untenable. Residents who remain in the neighborhood can quickly become cost burdened, spending more than the recommended 30% of their income on housing costs. Cost-burdened residents may fall behind on other bills, or scrimp on necessities like food, heat, and medication. Some people are forced to move further from the city center to find affordable housing. Although rents may be lower elsewhere, savings can be quickly offset by the increase in transportation costs to access school, work, and other resources (Brookings Institution, 2001).

While displacement from any home represents a significant injustice, the displacement of homeowners has a compounding generational effect. Historically, homeownership has been a primary way that American families with moderate incomes are able to build wealth. However, as a result of preferential lending to White people and predatory lending to People of Color (versions of which continue to this day), White people have had many

more opportunities for homeownership (Wyly et al., 2012). Consequently, the average White household has \$130,000 greater net worth than their Black and Latino counterparts (Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013). These economic stores make it possible to pursue higher education, to make a down payment on a home, or to withstand a period of unemployment. Many of the Nashville neighborhoods gentrifying today were once the only areas in the city where People of Color could own homes, and their residents were some of the first and second generations that did so. Given the legacy of restricted opportunities for homeownership and wealth production in communities of Color, the displacement of homeowners in gentrifying neighborhoods is particularly troubling and has repercussions for the economic well-being of future generations.

Although the loss of affordable housing is one of the most significant consequences of gentrification, it is not the only harm. The focus of my research in recent years has been the *more than material* consequences of gentrification; that is, the harms gentrification causes to long-time residents' sense of community, history, and belonging, as well as their sense of agency and civic participation (Thurber, 2018). Studying three gentrifying neighborhoods in Nashville, I found that gentrification disrupts social ties. Residents describe the pain of lost relationships, as friends are forced to move away, and the class and racial biases of newer residents prevent building new relationships. People who had lived a lifetime in their neighborhood express anguish at feeling like an outsider on one's own block, losing not only one's neighbors but a sense of belonging to a neighborhood. Residents often feel that their perspectives are ignored or discounted, and some describe being left out, or pushed out,

of places where people come together to make decisions, such as neighborhood associations. People mourn lost place histories as their neighborhoods are rebranded and express a deep desire to have their visions for their neighborhoods' futures valued. Given these harms—stigmatization, isolation, marginalization, and erasure—it is not hyperbole to understand gentrification as a form of violence. Gentrification uproots families, damages residents' social and emotional well-being, and tears at the fabric of communities.

Importantly, gentrification is not inevitable. Scholars from Jane Jacobs (1961) to Mindy Fullilove (2013) have highlighted models of urban living that disrupt the economic segregation of cities and ensure that a variety of types and costs of housing (as well as other critical amenities) are available in every neighborhood. Nor is gentrification unstoppable. There are dozens of policy strategies being used by cities to prevent or mitigate gentrification by building, funding, and preserving affordable housing (as cited in Thurber, Gupta, Fraser, & Perkins, 2014). Unfortunately, the city of Nashville has been slow to move the needle on affordable housing, the need for which has now reached crisis conditions. The mayor's office recently reported that nearly a third of residents cannot afford the cost of housing (Office of the Mayor, 2017), and in 2016, the population of homeless residents in the city increased by 10% from the prior year (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2016). Although the city is hamstrung in part by state legislation (which outlawed rent control provisions, for example), it is undeniable that the city could do more. But even if Nashville were to implement robust strategies to preserve and build affordable housing, these policies would not address the loss of social ties, sense of community,

and place-knowledge taking place in Nashville's gentrifying neighborhoods.

And, the more I studied these harms, the more deeply I came to realize that when my family sells our home and moves west, we will contribute to the damage gentrification causes. Though my family's move is voluntary, we too will lose meaningful social ties and place attachments. But my concern here is the constellation of impacts that selling our home might have on our neighbors and neighborhood, and particularly for those without the same financial stability and opportunities for mobility we have. Given all this, my family was left with the question: What's the most ethical way to sell our home?

Being accountable to the places we leave behind

As we prepared to list our home, my spouse and I began cataloguing the various impacts our home sale might have on the neighborhood. There was certainly a financial aspect to consider, as we understood that the sale of our home would contribute to driving up property values and rents around us. As such, it seemed appropriate to donate some portion of the profit to an affordable housing organization. But that would address only the material loss of affordable housing; what about the more-than-material losses to which our moving contributes? We were lucky to have had a role model in this regard, Ms. Audrey Stradford, the 73-year-old African American woman from whom we bought our home five years ago (see Figure 1).

These days, most people do not have the chance to meet the former owners of their homes, much less to build an ongoing relationship with them.



Figure 1. Abigail, Audrey, and Ella, 2012, Nashville, TN.

When she arrived mid-afternoon—she stopped by to drop off the garage door opener she had inadvertently taken—we had already ripped out the wall-to-wall carpet she had thoughtfully steam-cleaned less than 12 hours before, and were mid-way through demolishing a wall between the kitchen and living room. I walked outside when I saw an unexpected car pull up, and as I invited her in from the sweltering summer heat I stumbled over my words, wanting to prepare her for the physical changes already underway. She squealed with delight when she saw the hard wood floors, exclaiming "I always knew those were there!" She had long wanted to pull up the carpet and refinish the floors, but it had been too big a project for her to take on. As we walked through the house, she shared the history of each room, and wanted to know who in our family would be where. Astutely observing our twin 12-year-old daughters looking a bit morose, she offered to take them on a tour of the area sometime soon.

When she came back two weeks later, she again delighted in the changes to the house, and this time dropped off a large black and white photograph of the garden, where she had hand labeled all the plants by name so we would recognize them once they came up in the spring. She told us about the

high school across the street, describing how she used to stand on the front porch and clap along with the marching band as they entered the arena for Friday night football games. And then she loaded the girls into her car for an afternoon spent exploring the city.

Not only did Audrey help us develop place knowledge—providing insight into our new home, neighborhood, and city—she helped us develop social ties. During her visits, Audrey told us the names of our neighbors and the ages of their children. We invited her to our housewarming gathering, where unbeknownst to us she photographed many of our guests. She later dropped off large color prints so that we could surround ourselves with images of the community we were building. And she became part of that community. From the moment she offered to take the girls to explore the city, she seeded a special friendship with these children who had just landed more than two thousand miles from their nearest grandparent. We had periodic visits over the years, and she was always eager to see what changes we had made to the home and garden. She tracked with interest both my studies and my daughters' progress through school. She was invested in our well-being, and we in hers. And she was also invested in the well-being of the home we held in common, offering to help orient the new owner to the house when the time came for us to move.

During my doctoral program, I encountered American Studies scholar George Lipsitz's (2007, 2011) work on the Black spatial imaginary, and could not help but think of Audrey. Lipsitz describes spatial imaginaries as a "metaphorical construction that reveals actual social relations" (2007, p. 13). Spatial imaginaries can be understood as ideologies that manifest in individual and collective

relationships to place, land, and community. Lipsitz (2011) contends that there are distinct White and Black spatial imaginaries and, while they are not universally held by all members of each social group, they are pervasive and powerful enough to shape differing landscapes. In Lipsitz's (2011) formulation, the White spatial imaginary is characterized by an emphasis on individual gain, privatization, resource control, and wealth accumulation. In contrast, the Black spatial imaginary privileges "use value over exchange value, sociality over selfishness, and inclusion over exclusion" (2011, p. 61). In her efforts to ground us to place and people and her demonstrated commitment to the long-term well-being of her (former) neighborhood, Audrey exemplified these values. Lipsitz (2011) argues that the Black spatial imaginary offers "tools for building a more decent, humane, and just society, not just for Black people but for everyone" (p. 17). Audrey—and the Black spatial imaginary—also offer tools to those of us seeking an ethical way to sell our homes in a gentrifying market, and calls us to be accountable to the community we will leave behind.

Given each household's distinct financial and social situations, there is no singular way to approach such accountability. As my family grappled with what this might look like, we considered the following strategies:

- Help offset the loss of affordable housing. Donate a portion of sale value to a group organizing for or building affordable housing, and ask your real estate agent to consider making a matching contribution.
- Consider not accepting the "best" offer. Because homes are valued (and property taxes determined),

in part, based on the sale price of comparable homes in the neighborhood, taking less for the home may help mitigate the rapid inflation of housing in the neighborhood.

- Help stabilize the neighborhood. Vet prospective buyers based on their intended use of the property, and in light of the potential impacts on the neighborhood.
- Help preserve your neighborhood history. Leave a note with information regarding the history of the home and the community.
- Help nurture social ties. With your neighbors' permission, make introductions, either in person or by leaving a note with names and contact information.

We ultimately selected a combination of these strategies. Based on our real estate agent's projections, we anticipated making a \$200,000 profit from the sale of our home. As we prepared to list our home, we wrestled with the amount of money we would be prepared to donate. On the one hand, we were moving from one gentrifying city to another, where housing prices were significantly higher than Nashville, and with only one of the adults in our household as of yet employed. Like many homeowners, our wealth is in our home. We invested in the purchase and improvement of our Nashville house with the hope that it would allow us to buy our next home, and help us support our children through college. As such, the prospect of walking away from Nashville with less in our pockets was somewhat uncomfortable. On the other hand, the negative consequences of gentrification are not comfortable for my neighbors. The dramatic increase in the value of our home resulted from the newfound desirability of

our neighborhood—irrespective of the investments we made in the property. Understanding that the spike in home values directly contributes to the displacement of our most economically vulnerable neighbors, and balancing our own financial needs, we decided to contribute 5% of our sale price toward local affordable housing efforts.

As it happened, in a neighborhood where many older Black residents have been priced out, my family found ourselves in the unusual position of receiving an offer from Darlene, a middle-aged African American woman who had grown up in the neighborhood and was looking for a place to live with her elderly father. As she had attended the high school across the street, Darlene already had strong place attachments to the neighborhood and felt that the home and established gardens would be a perfect place for her family. The home was a bit outside her price range, and she asked that we consider an offer below the listing price. Her offer was 5% below what we had hoped to sell the home for—the difference of which we had already decided to donate—and we accepted her offer. Given our own financial constraints, by accepting a lower-than-planned price, we no longer felt able to make a donation to a housing organization. That said, by accepting a price below what we believed our house's estimated value, we hoped the sale would function to slow the inflation of homes values in our neighborhood—if only modestly—and thus mitigate the impact on property taxes and rents for the surrounding homes.

Following Audrey's modeling, we also hoped to address some of the more than material consequences of our move. Our last day in the house, our family gathered to meet Darlene and pass on the keys. I had a

pile of materials for her, warranties related to the home (some from Audrey's years in the house and some from ours) and a couple of books about the history of the neighborhood. As we passed through the now empty house and still abundant garden, we talked about kids and plants and our respective plans for the future. As a final stop, I walked Darlene next door and introduced her to some of her new neighbors. In the weeks that followed, we stayed in loose touch, texting about the house and garden. As my family has left the state, we will not be community to one another in the way Audrey was to us, but, I hope that we helped leave in place some of the connective tissue Audrey helped us to build, which linked us to our neighbors and neighborhood.

In many ways, we were lucky. Given prevailing trends, most people selling their homes in a gentrifying market will not have the opportunity to sell their house to someone who reflects the very demographic that is being priced out by rising costs. And though we did sell our home to Darlene, we have no control over what happens next: She could stay in the home forever, or she could scrape it, divide the lot, and build four high-priced homes. We can make no guarantees about the future of the home we leave behind. But we did endeavor to be accountable to the neighborhood we are leaving. In the end, I do not think it is possible to completely offset gentrification's harms, and I still wonder if my family could have done more, in our years as neighbors, and in the process of selling. Our home still sold for much more than our purchase price five years before, and to those neighbors with whom we were close, our moving frayed the social fabric of the block. Though we found a way to sell our home that felt ethical, it is still not altogether comfortable, and that is perhaps as it should be.

Ultimately, though gentrification does not result from individual actions, individuals do have responsibility to mitigate the harms of gentrification to which we have contributed. Each of us can consider the myriad of possible ways to be accountable to the neighborhoods we are leaving, and strive by our actions to be good neighbors, even in our uprooting.

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¹ To determine changes in housing values, I analyzed GIS layers provided by the Nashville Metro Planning Department (which include Tax Assessor data for 2002 and 2016, and neighborhood boundaries). To determine changes in racial demographics, I analyzed racial demographic data drawn from the 2000 Census (NP003A, Population by Race) and 2010 Census (P1, Race). In both cases, I used the Stratford School Zone boundaries to determine changes over time in my neighborhood.

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